# Beware the ORM Gods' Wrath

By LCdr. Mark Asuncion

As safety officer of my squadron, no one was more relieved than I when I made our squadron's final trap on USS *Nimitz* (CVN-68) during our 2005 WestPac deployment. After ORMing the heck out of the air-power demonstration for our tigers, I welcomed a break from worrying about mishaps, hazards, and dangers of the flight deck until the flyoff. For five months, three weeks, and five days, our squadron had done a great job of applying ORM on the flight deck, in the air, and on liberty. This effort had resulted in zero mishaps on cruise and the least number of liberty incidents for the entire airwing during our nine (yep, nine) port calls.

Soon after my flight, I had to prepare one last ORM lecture to give the entire squadron, per direction. I must admit I thought this task was ORM overkill. We just had had our safety standdown on the ship a week earlier and a series of mandatory return-and-reunion (R&R) briefs, which talked about ORM. Squadronmates, enlisted and officer, were asking me, before the 2030-to-2200 brief in the fo'c'sle, why we were having yet another lecture on ORM, the third in the past week and a half. All I could do was bite my tongue and give a wink and a smile.

Before I walked down to the fo'c'sle to give my presentation, I made a quick pass through the ready room to gather any stragglers. The only person there was the ASDO, who had to stay and watch the phones. Everyone else already was on the fo'c'sle awaiting my presentation. After our CAG and skipper spoke to the squadron, emphasizing safety, I went through my ORM presentation. I used a scenario of a road trip to Ensenada and a maintenance evolution on a carrier at night. The presentation turned into a good interactive discussion. I was pleased with the squadron's attentiveness and was confident the message had been re-absorbed. But, I still was a little irked at giving the presentation so soon after the safety standdown and R&R briefs.

Two nights later, the evening before the flyoff, I successfully—and unbelievably—had fallen asleep amidst the Halo chatter in the JO jungle (I had been displaced from my stateroom to make room for my roommate's tiger). Suddenly, though, I was awakened by a phone call from the SDO. Looking at the time and realizing I had about five hours before I had to wake up for the flyoff brief, I answered the phone a little perturbed. The SDO said that one of our maintainers just had gotten hit by a wing during a wingspread evolution, and temporarily was knocked unconscious. I quickly threw on my flight suit and headed into the ready room, where I found the XO and admin officer talking on the phone and executing the pre-mishap plan. The SDO was standing behind them, just watching. As I approached, the SDO told me the maintainer was in medical, and, though she was conscious, there was a good probability she would be on a medevac in the morning.

Apparently, during a normal wingspread evolution, the maintainer had been standing out of place, inside the wingspread arc. When the wing came down a lot faster than expected, it had hit her and thrown her back about five feet. In the process she had lost her cranial, and hit her head on the nonskid, momentarily knocking her unconscious. When I asked who it was, the SDO said it was one of our AD3s, the *same* one who was the ASDO the night of my ORM lecture and, thus, the only person who hadn't attended.

Meanwhile, the XO and admin officer stepped through various parts of the pre-mishap plan, trying to contact people on the ship and determine the type of mishap classification because of injury. Specifically, they wanted to reach strike ops to give the five-minute voice report. Nobody in the office answered the phone, so we went on a manhunt to locate him. After getting the wrong brick and stateroom numbers for him, I went down to the O-3 level looking for his stateroom, to no avail. After getting sidetracked in medical, I returned to the ready room almost an hour later to see the SDO shaking his head. I asked if the voice report had gone out and if we had found strike ops. He said no and that we didn't need to because, according to the pre-mishap plan, only Class A and B mishaps required the voice report. We had wasted an hour trying to do an assumed step, instead of following the pre-mishap plan.

I glanced at my watch and saw I had about three-and-a-half hours before I needed to get up and brief the flyoff; the SDO was in the same boat. With that realization, I dispatched him to his rack, and I went to mine, hoping the Halo tournament had ended for the night.

A little tired, but excited to get home, all four E-2s successfully launched for the flyoff in the morning, or, in this case, a few hours later in the morning.

Even if flight operations are over, something always can bite you.

My plane, the same one that had hit our maintainer the night before, was limited to 200 knots because of a missing structural member: the vapor-cycle fan. As a flight, we collectively decided to keep our planned four-plane-formation plan, only at 200 knots. We were eager to put on a good show for our families and sister squadrons waiting in Pt. Mugu.

During the transit, however, one of the other E-2s reported his flaps were stuck at 10 degrees, meaning he could not fly past 190 knots. Over tactical frequency, we decided to scrap the four-plane diamond plan and just come in a four-plan echelon, at a speed below 190 knots. During our form practices in the prior weeks, no one had flown form below 190 knots or in the 10-degree-flap configuration. However, this configuration didn't seem difficult, so we went with it.

Unfortunately, the visibility at Pt. Mugu wasn't as expected. Our lead aircraft stayed high at the initial-entry point until he saw the field. Once seeing the field, he began to descend to the carrier-break altitude. As he descended, his airspeed, according to my indicator, was past 190 knots. As he began to pull away from the formation, I, as Dash 2, called three different times for the lead to decrease speed by 10 knots to keep formation integrity. Dash 3 came over tactical and concurred. However, we received no transmissions from the pilot or co-pilot of the lead aircraft. Finally, about a mile from the runway, the lead aircraft slowed down. The rate of decrease was too great and unexpected, as I was at idle, passing the lead aircraft. Dash 3 passed me, and Dash 4 passed him. The formation quickly spread apart as we tried to regain our safety margin. Fortunately, we were able to do so. After a not-so-hot-looking formation, we landed to the wry smirks of some of our sister squadrons but ever so happy to be on deck—finally back from cruise.

That night, I thought about the last three days and realized there were a lot of ORM lessons to be learned. Cruise is not over until it's over. Routine flight-deck operations always require adherence to ORM. Had the injured maintainer followed written procedure, her injury most likely would not have happened.

The SDO and pre-mishap plan are there for a reason. Drills and training do not make a bit of difference if people interfere with the actual execution. I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if the SDO was allowed to execute the pre-mishap plan the way it was intended. Without the well-intentioned help from the senior officers, would we have wasted so much time, energy, and the necessary crew rest?

Flying formation in conditions not briefed is not good. Though we had ORM'ed the flyoff, we didn't take into consideration airspeed or configuration changes. The decision to continue the altered fly-in was made by all of us, on tactical freq, but without the complete time-critical-ORM analysis. If we had done this process, perhaps provisions for lost comms, airspeed limitations, and other variables would have been taken into account.

Never, ever complain about too much ORM training, no matter how much success you've had during a deployment. Even if flight operations are over, something always can bite you.

Was it a coincidence that the only person not to attend the ORM lecture was the one person injured on the night before the flyoff? And coincidence her mishap resulted in a flawed execution of the pre-mishap plan, which decreased crew rest before a formation flight flown in a configuration, airspeed, and flow not previously discussed? Probably. However, there's a part of me that thinks the ORM gods are smiling above, having given us a good, humbling lesson on the importance of ORM. And if they do truly exist, take it from me, never complain about too much ORM training, or beware their wrath.

LCdr. Asuncion flies with VAW-117.

## Mishap-Free Milestones

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| HSL-37 | 12 years | 70,000 hours |
| VP-1 | 23 years | 135,000 hours |
| VP-30 | 42 years | 415,000 hours |
| HMH-466 | 22 years | 60,000 hours |
| VP-45 | 37 years | 232,500 hours |